

# WRONG MOVE

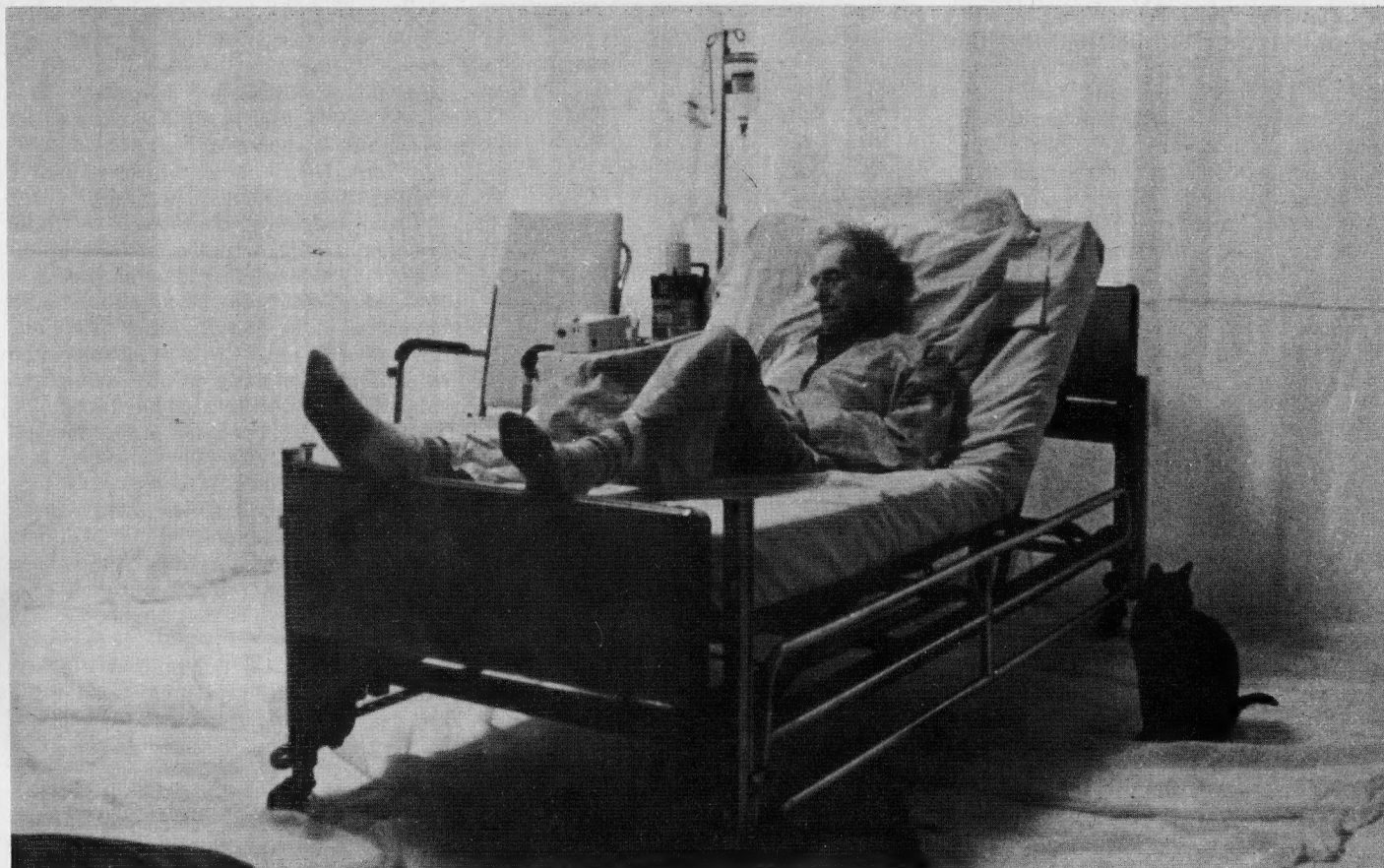
Jon Jost

The following words are not—and cannot be—distanced or dispassionate. I met Nick Ray in mid-December 1978, through a friend, the actor Bob Glaudini. Arriving penniless in New York after some months in Europe, we stayed briefly in Nick's SoHo loft. Ray was then an emaciated figure, ravaged by cancer and years of self-abuse. His simple presence cast the spectre of death, with all its attendant tension and awkwardness. We stayed two weeks before taking a drive-away to the West Coast, spending Christmas with Nick and his companion Susan Schwartz. Knowing it was Nick's last, everyone tried to make it 'a good one'.

I also met Wim Wenders, who came by to visit for an hour, as he had periodically done since working with Nick on *The American Friend*. Nick and Susan confided to us that Wenders had loosely promised a year earlier to help Ray make a film, or find financing, or ... At the same time, through Glaudini, they asked if I could help Nick make a last film. I had never seen a Ray film, at least that I remembered, but having some months open, I replied that I would be willing. We left on New Year's Day.

In January, I contacted Wenders by letter and phone from Hawaii, telling him I had two thousand dollars (all I had), and was going to New York to help Nick try to make a film. I was conscious of Wenders' promise to Nick, and asked if he could help raise some production funds. In February, I saw Wenders in Berkeley and was able to secure a promise of three thousand dollars. Preparing to go to New York, I was cautioned by friends who had had their own involvements with Ray. In the 60s and 70s Ray had cut a swathe through the alternative film community, using, and to some abusing, his own legend. All the stories came to bad ends.

I arrived in New York in March and moved into the loft. Nick and Susan, though they had been in touch with me, seemed surprised I had kept my promise. My own feelings were highly mixed—Nick could die at any moment, and at best it was a high risk venture: emotionally, financially, spiritually. And it was difficult for me to imagine Ray having the capacity any more to be lucid, or even the actual energy to work. It was clearly a long-shot gamble—though this was something with which both of us were familiar. After a week or so of



'Lightning Over Water': Nicholas Ray on set.

functionally nursing and talking fragmentarily with Nick, about the limitations of the money we had and his own physical restrictions, it was obvious to me that if he were to do anything, it had to be done in the loft and it had to be extraordinarily simple in that its production would require the greatest physical restraint. Nick would simply not be able to stand the rigours of even a modest level of film work.

About a week after my arrival, Wenders called to say he had obtained \$50,000 for a film—though this would require a treatment or script. With this news Ray seemed to shift into feeling something could be done, and for a week he tried to formulate something, though it was clearly terribly difficult for him (every day he had to be shown again how to turn a microcassette recorder on and off). Wenders, Ray and I had a number of three-way phone calls, trying in halting terms to discuss what had become 'the project'. During these I felt Ray tended to be misleading, asserting he had a script going when he actually had nothing to show.

Wenders scheduled a 'story conference' to be attended by Pierre Cottrell, producer, and Ed Lachman, cameraman. Several days before this, I told Nick I wished to call Wenders on my own, though Nick said he didn't want me to. I called Wenders anyway, feeling a moral obligation to make it clear to him what state Nick was in, and what could be anticipated. Wenders indicated that, over the telephone, he had felt Nick was unclear, and that what he planned was to come to New York for several weeks, to film Nick editing the unfinished film *We Can't Go Home Again*, and that he had arranged for Dennis Hopper and other

past friends of Nick's to come by and visit.

The day of the conference, Ray quickly concocted a 'story'. Nick would direct and play the lead, he would be a dying painter who steals back his old work, replacing it with forgeries. He would have a son who he feared was trying to take his young mistress. He would sail away with a Chinese laundryman, having recovered his past and his self-esteem. At the conference Ray spun this to Lachman, Cottrell and me, and enquired what we thought of it. They both answered encouragingly, saying it was fine, with small technical reservations. At my turn, I replied that I felt it was unrealistic to think Nick could play the lead and direct, or take the film out of the loft. Nick asked me if I had phoned Wenders and I answered honestly.

The next morning, Susan took me aside and asked me to leave, saying I was being disruptive and was spreading 'negative vibrations'. Since from the outset I had said I would take whatever role was required, I arranged to leave. The same day, I telephoned Wenders to tell him what had happened. My feeling was that the surge of film people, with their own energies and interests, was taking over, and that unless extreme care was taken to see Nick for what he was, a terribly sick and desperate man, it would only come to tragedy. Wenders said he would be in New York in a week to begin filming, and I asked him to please go live with Ray a week before he began work—to do this so that he could gauge from direct experience what Nick's condition was and what could humanely be expected of him. I left the following day.

In the next weeks, I stopped by to gather some of my things, and Nick's loft

was busy with people. He was trying to write his script, since Wenders' arrival was imminent. I showed him how to work his microcassette machine. He seemed lost. I left New York on a trip several days before Wenders' arrival, and returned in early May. Under the press of time, Wenders had begun shooting immediately. A week later, Nick was in hospital. Susan enthused that thirty hours of film had been shot, and the budget was going up. On 15 May 1979, I saw Nick one last time. He had just returned home from hospital. I asked him, 'How did it go, Nick? How is the film?' He looked at me out of his one good eye and said, 'Terrible. It's awful. Don't like it at all.'

Postscript: In May 1980, *Nick's Film* was shown at Cannes, receiving a generally bad press. Shortly after, Wenders withdrew the film from festival commitments and took it for reworking. A second version, *Lightning Over Water*, was released: a voice-over commentary by Wenders provides an explanatory 'text'. In a melodramatic, *film noir* tone, Wenders tries to have his truth and eat it: the film is a fiction, he says, and with this facile twist tries, though he transparently fails, to defuse the most damning aspects of this painful film.

Some items. About one-third through the film, Wenders exclaims that looking at rushes from the shooting had disclosed what his eyes had not seen: that Ray was dying in front of him. It is an appalling and pathetic admission: one only needed eyes and a human heart. Wenders describes seeing Nick being driven away to hospital, but offers no thoughts on why. He comments on the icy precision of the film's imagery, that in the middle

of filming he had felt they aestheticised the truth in front of him, and that this was a sign of his own fears. Without a trace of irony, the film continues in the same visual vein, with further scenes, surely done later, after Nick's death: glassy aerials of New York, a bombastic swooping helicopter flight beneath the span of Verrazano Bridge, as if somehow these technical exercises would cleanse the film's moral uncertainty.

In an astounding scene, Wenders lies curled, as if wounded, on a sterile hospital bed, while Ray sits beside him asking, 'What are you doing here? Standing on my back.' And seeming to lose whatever 'lines' he had, he begins a tirade as the camera holds mercilessly on his even more devastated face. 'Wim, you make me sick to my stomach . . . ah, I should have done something funny. I could have puked all over you, that'd be funny.' Drained of this venom beneath cold light, Nick asks that they stop. Wenders' voice off-screen, low: 'Then say cut.' Nick: 'Cut . . . cut . . . cut.' The camera keeps gazing, appallingly, and Wenders' voice, low, to his cameraman, says, 'No, don't cut.' Nick's head lolls back and forth, 'No, don't cut, don't cut.' One might admire Wenders' 'honesty' in retaining this scene; one can hardly admire the callous manipulation it betrays.

'How'd it go, Nick?' I asked. 'Terrible. It's awful.' You're damned right. And he even stuck your name on it.

The film business has long been noted for cruelty and harshness. In his last months, Nick Ray needed something for himself, though perhaps he didn't know what that was. It certainly wasn't this movie, which clearly he did know. What Ray needed, simply, was love. Instead he got a crew who seem to perceive life only through the mechanical devices of film. They rolled over him with a movie-making machine, and now they even choose to display the carnage. □